

U.S. SENATOR BEN CARDIN



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Dear Fellow Marylanders:

For many, Presidents' Day usually is not a holiday that inspires deep philosophical reflections.

But this year is different.

On Monday, as we commemorate the lives of our most remarkable presidents like George Washington and Abraham Lincoln, the U.S. Senate also will be at the end of an unprecedented second trial for a U.S. president who was impeached while in office.

So, as we execute our duties as set forth in the Constitution and act as jurors considering the impeachability of a former president, Presidents' Day 2021 begs us to consider what qualities define the best of America's chief executives.

Humility is a quality that springs to mind first, probably because it's quite difficult to strike a balance between being arguably the most powerful person in the world and the inherent fallibility of all human beings.

Nobody's perfect, and yet no one likes admitting they were wrong about anything. Ever.

Truly great presidents, however, have been as willing to embrace their failures as they are their finest hours. Failures teach us lessons that victories never could. From failure can be born monumental success.

President Lincoln's life is a prime example. The internet is jam-packed with hardships that Lincoln supposedly suffered before become perhaps one of our finest presidents. While only maybe half of them actually are true, they are remarkable nonetheless.

Lincoln endured and overcame political and personal heartbreak, mountains of honorably assumed debt, and a string of professional disappointments.

Yet his terms as president redefined the type of massive social change possible via the Executive Branch, and the sheer good that resulted from his courage cannot be overstated.

"Always bear in mind that your own resolution to succeed is more important than any other one thing," President Lincoln wrote in 1855.

Another great leader who led the nation out of extreme challenges, Franklin D. Roosevelt, underscored this mindset. “It is common sense to take a method and try it. If it fails, admit it frankly, and try another,” he said. “But by all means, try something.”

The sage words of FDR also reveal another key attribute of the finest presidents, unshakable determination.

His cousin, President Theodore Roosevelt, put a finer point on it.

“No, I’m not a good shot,” the famed hunter and conservationist once said. “But I shoot often.”

The 26th president, a populist’s populist, also had a clear understanding of the true meaning of patriotism, another facet shared by our finest leaders.

“Patriotism means to stand by the country,” Roosevelt wrote. “It does not mean to stand by the president.”

Teddy Roosevelt’s incisiveness rings especially poignant at the crossroads we find ourselves in today. As my colleagues consider how they will vote at the end of the current trial, I most hope they reflect on this Republican president’s reflections on patriotism.

Interestingly, Roosevelt penned these words in a 1918 essay entitled “Lincoln and Free Speech,” which speaks to another key trait of our best presidents: a strong commitment to our First Amendment freedoms.

Because his presidency occurred against the backdrop of the Civil War, President Lincoln was one of the first chief executives to find himself in a situation where free speech and assembly were limited to protect the lives of our military and hold the country together.

Still, Lincoln, a strong believer in human liberties, knew there was a clear line between Americans’ First Amendment rights to peaceful assembly and a violent insurrection. In 1838, Lincoln said, “There is no grievance that is a fit object of redress by mob law.”

Indeed, Mr. Lincoln.

Another great, President John F. Kennedy, spoke frequently of the importance of being devoted to protecting these liberties so critical to our democracy.

“I think it is appropriate that we pay tribute to this great constitutional principle which is enshrined in the First Amendment of the Constitution: the principle of religious independence, of religious liberty, of religious freedom.”

“I would not look with favor upon a President working to subvert the First Amendment’s guarantees of religious liberty,” Kennedy said in 1960. “Neither do I look with favor upon those who would work to subvert Article VI of the Constitution by requiring a religious test - even by indirection.”

President Kennedy’s support of our First Amendment protections also extended to respecting the role of the “Fourth Estate,” our free press, as all great presidents do.

In April 1961, President Kennedy addressed the American Newspaper Publishers Association as Cold War tensions were spiking.

“The unprecedented nature of this challenge ... also gives rise to your second obligation — an obligation which I share. And that is our obligation to inform and alert the American people — to make certain that they possess all the facts that they need, and understand them as well — the perils, the prospects, the purposes of our program and the choices that we face.”

“No President should fear public scrutiny of his program,” President Kennedy said. “For from that scrutiny comes understanding; and from that understanding comes support or opposition. And both are necessary.”

“I am not asking your newspapers to support the administration, but I am asking your help in the tremendous task of informing and alerting the American people,” said President Kennedy.

“For I have complete confidence in the response and dedication of our citizens whenever they are fully informed.”

Complete confidence in the American people is another shared quality of all great presidents. Our distinct, shared perseverance is one of the many qualities that make America great.

“When times get tough, we don’t give up,” President Barack Obama said of America. “We get up.”

That resolve is being tested. As a nation, and as a Senate, we are being forced to decide whether to act in support of justice and accountability for a president who trashed the norms of the office and incited a violent insurrection against the very foundations of our government.

On Presidents’ Day 2021, the words of the man the holiday was created to honor, President George Washington, ring most true. Washington’s unwavering commitment to justice set the standard for future presidents.

Said President Washington: “No punishment, in my opinion, is too great for the man who can build his greatness upon his country’s ruin.”

Thank you for your time. Please stay safe.


Ben Cardin

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